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ABSTRACT

Existing evidence on family violence rates by age and race as well as the available data on race and physical elder abuse incidence rates suggests that because such data are not based on random or representative samples and tend to reflect a "sampling artifact" of the particular client populations served by the professionals surveyed, there are no reliable data on the extent or nature of elder abuse among black Americans. An exploration of demographic data and the extant literature on black aging and black families for propositional correlates may provide heuristic insights into research, treatment, and social policy issues needing further exploration. A systems model is a vehicle for conceptualizing the simultaneous operation of societal level, family-kin-community, individual characteristics, and precipitating factors thought to be associated with the occurrence of elder abuse. Although there are both "high risk" and countervailing factors theoretically associated with the occurrence of elder abuse among black Americans, the overall evidence suggests that low-income blacks should constitute a "high risk" group for its occurrence. Social policy must formulate suggestions both for the amelioration and elimination of elder abuse among black Americans. (Author/JAC)

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ELDER ABUSE AND BLACK AMERICANS:

INCIDENCE, CORRELATES, TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

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INCIDENCE, CORRELATES, TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

INTRODUCTION

A cursory analysis of the history and development of social issues in American society reveals a common pattern. Whenever possible[1], in establishing the legitimacy of an issue, considerable effort is expended to demonstrate that it has broad, or even universal, relevance. This has certainly been the case with all aspects of family violence, including elder abuse. The point has been persistently made that elder abuse (as was earlier the case with child abuse and wife abuse) affects individuals from all walks of life. The rich and poor, black and white, the uneducated and the highly educated. Because the problem is conceptualized as a universal one it is often assumed that universalistic research and intervention strategies are appropriate. Research focussing on the diversity of the extent and nature of family violence phenomenon among different groups works against the aforementioned legitimization strategy and subsequently is not encouraged. Only after the issue has become firmly established, sanctioned, and funded is the veil of "selective inattention" (Dexter, 1958) lifted from the great diversity of distinct populations that need to be understood if effective intervention strategies are to be implemented to meet their unique needs and circumstances.

Unfortunately by the time programs and policies are institutionalized, based on some fanciful notion of a mythical "universal man," it is discovered that, in fact, they work effectively for no one. Those who need them most use them least, and the next ten years of research and

service efforts are devoted to what went wrong, or what patchwork efforts can be made to make inappropriate theories and practices work.

Hopefully, this pitfall will be avoided in our society's attempts to understand and eliminate the problem of elder abuse. At this stage the relevance of questions raised, as opposed to the definitive answers offered provides the key vehicle through which this can be accomplished. It is the objective of this chapter to explore the limited data available on how family violence is affected by age and race, to review what is known about the black aged in regards to those factors that might place them at special risk and those countervailing forces that may work against such abuse, and finally to make suggestions as to how elder abuse among blacks can best be conceptualized and ameliorated. In brief, this paper will focus on the incidence, correlates, treatment and prevention of physical elder abuse among black Americans.

INCIDENCE

Family Violence and Race

The relationship between family violence rates and what is broadly conceptualized as "race" is a perplexing one. The data are inconsistent and their interpretations can be misleading (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980). In the literature review of an earlier article concerned with race and family violence rates (Cazenave and Straus, 1979), it was concluded that the existing literature tended to leave the reader with more questions than answers. While it is generally assumed that marital violence is higher for blacks than it is for other groups (Staples, 1976), much of the empirical data on black family violence is based on agency reported cases of child abuse. Some studies conclude that blacks experience higher rates of child abuse than whites (Gil, 1970). Others

have found that blacks have lower rates (Griswald and Billingsley, 1967; Billingsley, 1969). Finally, some found no noteworthy differences (Young, 1963). Family researchers also do not agree on the relationship between race and family violence rates. Some believe that blacks will automatically have higher rates of child abuse, spouse and sibling abuse because of their day-to-day encounters with racial and economic oppression. Others base their theories on research done on the functions of black extended family-kin-ties (Hays and Mendel, 1973; Shimkin, Louie, and Frate, 1973; Stack, 1974; Aschenbrenner, 1973; Hill, 1977; Hill and Shackleford, 1978; Jack, 1979) which suggest that strong support networks, especially in regards to children and the elderly, will buffer against the occurrence of such violence. In brief, even if empirical data are available, special care must be taken not to confuse the effects of race with income level, employment status, or different patterns of social organization and cultural expectations and values concerning violence.

To provide some answers to the complex issue of the extent and nature of family violence among black Americans, Cazenave and Straus (1979) analyzed a sub-sample of a 1976 survey on violence in 2,143 American families (see Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980). This sub-sample consisted of 147 black families and 427 white families. Particular attention was placed not only on race as a variable, but social class and involvements in extended-family-kin networks, as well. These findings show that no categorical statement can be made as to whether black or white families are more violent. Instead the results are specific to the type of family violence and the degree of abuse described. For example, based on the sub-sample of intact families, it was found that while black husbands were three times as likely as white husbands to

have slapped their wives and to have engaged in severe violence (including kicking, biting, hitting with a fist or an object, or the use of a knife or gun) within the last year, black and white parents were equally as likely to have engaged in such abuse against children, and blacks were slightly less likely to report having slapped or spanked a twelve year old. Blacks were also less likely to report the occurrence of either sibling abuse or parent abuse within the last year. Finally, while income, husband's occupational status, and involvement with family-kin-neighbors were associated with lower rates of family violence for all respondents their effects were especially dramatic for black families. These findings suggest ethnically variant patterns of family violence that might provide key insights in our understanding of elder abuse among black Americans. In later sections of this paper, a more detailed assessment will be given to these findings and what they suggest for understanding and eliminating elder abuse in black families.

Family Violence: Race and Age

Violence and the black aged is a virtually unexplored research frontier (Cazenave, 1979). Little, if any, research has been done specifically in this area and what is available is limited to empirical data contained in a few general reports on elder abuse where prevalence rates by race were included as a minor (generally de-emphasized) variable. Age was one factor explored in the Cazenave and Straus (1979) analysis. Finally, the chapter will suggest some theory notes that might be relevant to expanding the understanding of this issue. In the remaining sections each of these limited information sources will be explored in detail.

The findings on the relationship between race and elder abuse incidents are inconclusive. None of these studies were based on random

or representative samples and, overall, the results seem to simply reflect the particular population served by those who did the reporting. This type of "sampling artifact" is explicitly discussed in the Legal Research and Services to the Elderly (1979) report on elder abuse in Massachusetts. After reporting that 85% of the reported cases were identified as involving white respondents, with only 4% black, 8% other, and 3% race not reported, the authors suggest that these results may simply reflect the nature of the population served by those professionals and para-professionals reporting elder abuse cases. Unfortunately there was no description of this population so that the readers could comprehend the precise nature of the sampling artifact.

Based on their study of clients of a chronic illness center in Cleveland, Ohio, Lau and Kosberg (1979) found that 26% of the abused persons were black. This finding seems to be consistent with their description of the center's client population. That is, blacks were overrepresented as clients generally so it is not surprising that blacks should also be overrepresented in actual observed abuse cases. Finally, Block and Sinnott (1979) found that based on the professionals they surveyed, 12% of the abused were black. That is, blacks were proportionally represented consistent with their proportion of the total U.S. population. Again however, their study was not based on a representative sample of the total U.S. population but their survey of professionals who were assumed to have regular contact with the aged. The racial composition of the clients served by these professionals must be known before conclusions can be drawn as to precisely what that 12% represents.

In brief, based on the existing studies of elder abuse, it is not known how the incidence rates for elder abused are effected by race.

More research is needed using representative (non-agency bound) samples before any definitive conclusions can be made as to whether the incidents of elder abuse are higher, lower, or roughly equivalent between black and white Americans.

PROPOSITIONAL CORRELATES

Although there are no credible data on the extent or nature of elder abuse among black Americans some of the factors associated with elder abuse generally have been identified, and there is an extensive literature on black families which together might be helpful in identifying propositions as to possible "high risk" factors predisposing blacks to elder abuse and countervailing forces which might work against its occurrence.

Steinmetz and Straus' Systems Model

Steinmetz and Straus (1974) suggest that rather than looking at the numerous single factor explanations of family violence, a more comprehensive model can be employed through the use of modern systems theory. Such an approach to elder abuse can be illustrated (see Steinmetz and Straus, 1974:18-19) through a diagram of the interrelationships of societal level variables, family variables, individual characteristics of family members, and precipitating factors. The systems approach adds a dynamic quality to the analysis of family violence phenomenon in that it is possible to illustrate the simultaneous operations of numerous different variables and their interrelationships in one diagram.

Such a model also makes explicit possible intervention points that might ordinarily be overlooked. Theoretically one can start anywhere, but all relevant factors must be considered and dealt with. Another advantage of such a model is that it makes clear how such violence

systems-once generated-begin to take on a life of their own. The more a person is physically abused the more this positive feedback generates more violence in the future. When violence is no longer tolerated, the system must readjust itself.

Finally by treating the system as an "open", as opposed to a "closed" self-contained entity this approach emphasizes the dynamic interplay between what happens in families and other sub-systems of society, including those social service agencies designated to help them.

Societal Variables

Poverty

While family violence cuts across all socio-economic levels of society and is not the exclusive province of the poor, it must be acknowledged that generally speaking there tends to be a close relationship between the access that a particular group has to societal resources and the degree and types of problems encountered by its membership. Cazenave and Straus (1979) demonstrated the relationship between income and family violence rates. Income had an especially dramatic effect in determining rates of marital, parent-to-child, sibling, and child-to-parent violence for black respondents. Their low-income status places many blacks into a "high risk" group for family violence. The magnitude of this problem can be seen in the fact that collectively the median family income of blacks is only 57% of white American families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Overall, 31% of black Americans live below the poverty level compared to 9% for whites. By focusing specifically on those persons 65 years and older it can be noted that more than a third of elderly blacks (i.e. 36%, compared to 13% for whites) live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

Female Headed Households

Since abused elders tend to be female (Legal Research and Services for the Elderly, 1979) and since research on other forms of family violence show a strong relationship between income and violence rates, the fact that 42% of black females 65 years or older live in poverty (compared to 16% for white females) might logically suggest that a large portion of these women, because of their (and their families) relative position in this country's opportunity structure, may be "high risk" cases for the occurrence of elder abuse (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

High Crime Neighborhoods

It is also clear that ecologically speaking the potentially violence precipitating stresses and strains experienced by poor families are not limited to the boundaries of the home. Poor families generally live in impoverished communities which are characterized by high rates of interpersonal violence. Elderly blacks are more fearful of criminal assaults within their neighborhoods, and are more likely to be the actual victims of such assaults, than is the case for white elderly persons (Ragan, 1977). If the black elderly live in a generally more violent environment, it may be the case that some of this violence will manifest itself in the home in the form of elder abuse.

Family-Kin-Community Organization

Multi-generational Households

One aspect of black family organization that would lead us to expect the potential for relative high incidences of abuse between the aged and other family members is the number of black multi-generational households. According to U.S. Census figures (U.S. Bureau of the Census,

1978:3), black women sixty-five years or older "were much more likely to maintain families without a husband (21 percent) than white women (8 percent)." This might suggest that their "time at risk" (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980) as potential victims of abuse by family members is greater, and that consequently old black women might experience higher rates of such abuse. However, empirical research is needed before any clear conclusions can be drawn as to the relationship between the relatively large number of black multi-generational households and the occurrence of elder abuse. The nature of these relationships may tell us just as much as their existence. For example, most of the research on elder abuse (L.R.S.E., 1979; Lau and Kosberg, 1979; Block and Sinnott, 1979) suggest that dependence is a major correlate of abuse. Robert Hill (1971) notes that the black elderly living in multi-generational families tend to have their children living with them while the white elderly tend to live with their children. In a later article Hill (1978:4) states that "because of their desire to be as self-reliant as possible, black elderly are much more likely to take others into their households rather than permit themselves to be taken into the households of young relatives." Unfortunately, unlike wife abuse their is no research evidence that having economic, home ownership and other resources will reduce the possibility of the elderly being physically abused. Perhaps the young-old who are in good mental and physical health and are heads of multi-generational families may be able to use such resources to prevent their maltreatment more than the old-old (those 75 and older), severely impaired persons who are most likely to be the victims of elder abuse.

Such research has implications for all American families since, as Gelfand, et al. (1978) suggest, with the increased life expectancy of older persons, there is a growing incidence of multi-generational homes (Cazenave, 1979). Research into the precise nature of such multi-generational relationships is sorely needed since there is evidence that their may be key ethnic differences in family boundary maintenance systems that may effect how elderly members are received and treated.

The Impact of Non-Nuclear Family Members

Cazenave and Straus (1979) found important differences between black and white families in regards to the effect of the presence of non-nuclear family members in the home on various forms of family violence. These findings led to the conclusion that "depending on how their presence in the home is interpreted, whether they are considered to be a help, a nuisance, an outsider or what have you, they can, by their mere presence, tend to reduce the amount of family violence, or to create tensions and stresses that might be associated with an acceleration of violence", (Encore Magazine, 1980:54). In brief, how the presence of elderly adults in the home is perceived and accepted may be just as important a predictor of the potential of elder abuse as their presence, per se.

Social Isolation and Social Support Systems

There is a growing body of literature which suggests that social isolation is a crucial factor associated with severe forms of family violence (Garbarino 1977; Cazenave and Straus, 1979; Garbarino and Stocking, 1980). Cazenave and Straus (1979) noted that there is considerable evidence which suggests that the amount of social isolation differs by class, residence and race. For example, Hays and Mendel's study

(1973:55) of 25 black and 25 white families was cited where it was found that "Black families interacted with extended kin more and perceived them as more significant." This suggested that the black extended family-kin system was an important support system which served as a buffer from a racially hostile environment. Shimkin, Louie and Frate (1973) studied a large black extended family system in the South and concluded that one of its unique functions is the prevention of child abuse and neglect among the black lower-classes. Later research by Stack (1974), Aschenbrenner (1973, 1975), Hill and Shackleford (1978), and Jack (1978) document the role of the black extended family-kin system as an important support system for black families. Cazenave and Straus (1979) looked at how such networks might work to reduce rates of family violence and found that blacks were more embedded in family-kin-locality networks and that while involvement in such networks was associated with lower rates of marital, child, parent and sibling violence for both black and white families, the effect was especially dramatic for black families. It was concluded that low-income, socially isolated black families constituted a "high risk" group for the occurrence of family violence. This suggests that elder abuse may be most common in the increasing number of poverty stricken, multi-generational female headed households, provided that they are socially isolated from support from other kin, neighbors and friends.

In brief, with the increasing number of female headed households and the rising rate of out-of-wedlock births (more than 50% of all black births in 1976; U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 1978) there may be an erosion of traditional family-kin supports and an increasing problem of elder abuse in such multi-generational households.

In the Cazenave and Straus (1979) study of race, class and network embeddedness as correlates of family violence it was found that black families were less likely to have been recent migrants to their neighborhoods and that such neighborhood stability was associated with lower rates of family violence, especially for black families. Of course, all neighborhoods are not alike. The ecology of some neighborhoods may encourage high rates of interpersonal violence, both in and outside of the home, while other neighborhood structures might serve as a support against the occurrence of such violence.

In his discussion of support systems in different types of neighborhoods Donald Warren (Garbarino and Stocking, 1980) delineates three key dimensions: identify with the neighborhood, interaction within its boundaries, and linkages to the larger community. By evaluating communities as to how many, if any, of these characteristics they possess, Warren identifies six neighborhood types. Three of these appear to provide valuable insights for an understanding of elder abuse in predominantly black neighborhoods. Oftentimes black communities are conceptualized as being characterized by strong ethnic identity, and being close-knit, self-contained and independent from the larger, surrounding social environment. It is assumed that despite the difficulties its members face in the racially and economically exploitative "outside" that the basic fabric of community life within these "parochial" communities is essentially healthy and non-pathological. However, considering the reports of urban black elderly persons (e.g., Ragan's 1977 study on their fear of crime), many (if not most) do not appear to live under such relatively idyllic circumstances. For example, in his demographic analysis of elderly blacks, Hill (1978) noted a trend of the black aged

moving from more rural areas to the central cities of large metropolitan areas while the white elderly move to the suburbs. Moreover Bourg (1975) in his study of the elderly in Nashville found that the black aged were more geographically mobile and less likely to be homeowners. This suggests that blacks are more likely to live in transitory neighborhoods, often with them moving in and the white aged moving out. Warren (Garbarino and Stocking, 1980) refers to these types of neighborhoods as "Transitory" in that while their are linkages to environments outside, there is little identification or interaction with the community within. In these "zones of transition" sociologists have documented almost every type of pathological behavior imaginable. These areas might be expected to have relatively high rates of elder abuse. The third neighborhood type that is relevant to the life experiences of many black aged is what Warren refers to as a "Diffuse" neighborhood. In these homogeneous structures there is strong in-group identification but little else. There is little in the way of meaningful interaction within the community or transactions with the world outside. For the white aged a diffuse neighborhood might be a socially and geographically isolated suburb. For the black aged they are more likely to be low-income housing projects. In both there may exist the social isolation upon which family violence breeds. In many black communities there are the additional burdens of abject poverty, dirty streets, noise pollution, and high density dwellings.

In brief, there is no <u>one</u> black community. The social and geographic character of where aged black persons live suggests a great deal about the types of problems they may face, including elder abuse; and they also suggest a great deal about interventions to be applied towards its amelioration.

Shared Value Systems

Related to the discussion of community-ecological factors associated with occurrence of varying rates of elder abuse is the effect of shared value systems which either encourage or discourage such abuse. For example, within black communities it is often said that blacks are more humane in their treatment of their aged than is generally the case for whites. This is a widely held belief although there is little but impressionistic evidence to support it. Wylie (1971) provides a good example of this view. According to Wylie (1971:67) "It is generally accepted that black Americans are more inclined than whites to include the elderly in the family structure and to regard the elderly with respect, if not veneration." If this is true then we would expect that elder abuse would be significantly less of a problem among blacks as compared to white Americans. If it is not true, but the folklore about how blacks are better in the treatment of the elderly persists, it may mean that these beliefs may work to hinder the recognition of the existence of physical elder abuse within black families, and its amelioration.

One argument used as evidence to support this view is the relatively fewer number of black aged who are institutionalized as compared to the white elderly. When actual empirical evidence is scrutinized it becomes obvious that even this assumption is severely challenged. For example, Jacquelyn Jackson (1977:151) reports that, "While in 1960, many fewer Southern old black women lived in institutions than the rest of the population (only 1 percent as compared with 4 percent), by 1970 the proportion of those over 65 who lived in such group settings was similar to the American population as a whole. In fact, outside the South more were institutionalized (8 percent)." Jackson (1977:153) also cites a

1968 study by Lopata of black and white widows in Chicago which found that black widows were no more likely to be embedded in an enduring kinship structure than white widows.

Empirical research is needed in order to determine if there are any distinct cultural patterns or values that may serve as countervailing forces against the occurrence of physical elder abuse (e.g., another folk value prominent in the socialization of blacks is that "You will never, under any circumstances, hit your mother" (Encore Magazine, 1980:57). As it stands now there is no evidence that the black aged are actually treated better than their white counterparts or would be less likely to be victimized by physical abuse.

The issue of the precise effect of shared value systems on the prevalence of elder abuse is further complicated by the suggestion by some sociologists that low-income minority communities are characterized by what they refer to as a sub-culture of violence (Scherer, Abeles, and Fisher, 1975). According to this view individuals growing up in such a subculture learn that violence is normal, expected, and instrumental in achieving certain desired ends. Consequently they develop favorable attitudes towards its use. Unfortunately, like theories suggesting that blacks have attitudes that would lead them to be less abusive to their elderly, this theory is largely impressionistic, and there is little evidence to suggest that their is a direct causal relationship between pro-violence attitudes and the actual occurrence of violence. More attention will have to be paid to the shared value system of black communities in order to understand the etiology of elder abuse and to develop the most effective intervention strategies.

Individual Characteristics

Another way of generating propositions regarding the extent and nature of elder abuse involving black Americans is to look at what the available research evidence suggests as to the individual characteristics of abused elders and those who do the abusing. The best available data on the individual characteristics of abused elders show that statistically speaking they tend to be old-old (i.e., 75 years or older), female, physically or mentally disabled, overly represented among the low income, and to have lived with the abuser who overwhelmingly tended to be relatives (Legal Research and Services for the Elderly, 1979).

Age, Sex, Health, and Income

When we consider that: the overall proportion of black old-old is increasing at a faster rate than that of the white population (Hill, 1978), the fact that the number of black female elderly is increasing faster than is the case for black males (Jackson, 1977); and the low-income status of the black aged already discussed, it becomes clear that the black aged constitute a potentially "high risk" group for abuse. In addition to these basic demographic variables, we also know that black aged persons fit closely the characteristics of abused elders in that: they are (especially females) more likely to live in multi-generational households (Bourg, 1975); and they are more likely to fit into the category of "frail" elderly. The evidence on the impaired physical condition of black as compared to white elderly is especially noteworthy. For example, in his study of the elderly in Nashville, Bourg (1975) found that more than twice as many blacks as whites were so physically impaired that they needed to be accompanied to leave their home. Similarly, based on their study of blacks, Mexican-Americans and whites

in Los Angeles county, Dowd and Bengston (1978:430) concluded that, "older minority respondents were significantly more likely to report poorer health than white respondents even with the effects of S.E.S., sex, and income held constant".

Alcoholism, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Problems

The Legal Research and Services for the Elderly Study (1979) also found that nearly a third of the abusers had problems with alcoholism or drug addiction. Such problems tended to be much more prevalent in low-income black communities than in the society-at-large. The same is true for other characteristics of elder abusers identified in that study including long term medical complaints, long term financial problems, a history of mental illness, and limited education. All of these characteristics are associated with the amount of stress inherent in such environments and the ability of individuals to effectively manage such stress.

Precipitating Factors

In an attempt to identify specific situational factors precipitating abuse the Legal Research and Services for the Elderly survey (1978:31) "indicated that the abuser was experiencing some form of stress when the abuse occurred". Large numbers of multi-generational households and frail elderly persons combined with the stressful conditions associated with being low income, black, and living in a stressful environment, may converge to amplify the number of stressful situations that black Americans may be subjected to in the care of frail elderly. Any or a combination of stressors might place the black dependent aged at risk of physical, psychological, emotional or financial abuse.

Overall, when societal, family-kin-community, individual and precipitating factors are considered it becomes clear that although there may

exist some countervailing forces against the abuse of the black aged, generally the social conditions under which they live suggest that many black Americans are a potentially high risk population for the occurrence of elder abuse.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Unfortunately the same set of complex factors that may make blacks more (or less) vulnerable to elder abuse may work against the institutionalization of effective intervention strategies for its treatment and social policies for its prevention. In reference to child abuse David Gil (1977) makes the important distinction between the amelioration of a social problem and primary prevention. Amelioration refers to what social workers can do within a particular social context to treat the manifestation of a particular problem. On the other hand, primary prevention involves fundamental changes in the social structure which would eliminate the root causes of the problem and its occurrence in the future. In discussing propositional correlates which might suggest something of the extent and nature of the problem of elder abuse this chapter began with societal level variables and then moved to a discussion of potential abuse precipitating factors. In order to focus on treatment intervention strategies before discussing policies for primary prevention, it will now reverse this process, beginning with the actual elder abuse incidents.

Elder Abuse Incidents

Thorman (1980) advises that professionals working with abusing families must be positive and non-threatening if they are to establish the needed rapport to help.[2] It is unlikely that all persons working in areas related to the identification and treatment of elderly abuse

possess the sensitivity and skills to enable them to establish a close trusting relationships with clients across racial and/or socio-economic status boundaries (Day, 1979). After the detection of a suspected case of elder abuse the most important challenge facing the professional or para-professional is the design and implementation of a non-threatening intervention strategy. Failure at this point might insure the establishment of effective boundary maintenance systems to keep the threatening "intruders" out. Ultimately this may lead to more isolation and tension and the intensification of abuse encountered by the aged. The importance of non-racist, ethnically sensitive, non-class elitist practitioners who are genuinely concerned with the problems of violence prone low-income black families, as well as their abused elderly members, cannot be over emphasized.

Precipitating Factors and Individual Characteristics

The most common immediate cause of elder abuse appears to be the stress experienced by individuals who must care for the frail elderly without adequate support. Of course, stress has many different levels of manifestation and causation. What appears to be clear, however, in terms of the immediate needs of those who care for the frail elderly is that there has been no systematic training to help individuals to more effectively care for the long-term health care needs of the aged and no programmatic assistance for those who are no longer able to manage such stress in a non-abusive manner. Programs designed to provide support for families responsible for providing long-term custodial care for the aged are sorely needed in black communities. And when we again look at those who are most likely to be abused: the old-old, female, physically and mentally disabled, low-income, aged living with relatives, there is,

as we demonstrated earlier, evidence that many low-income blacks could benefit from stress management oriented programs to help reduce the potential for elder abuse.

Family-Kin-Community Factors

While there is research evidence to suggest that embeddedness in primary networks may be associated with lower rates of family violence (Cazenave and Straus, 1979; Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino and Stocking, 1980) there is also evidence that the types of close-knit network structures common in many black communities may actually work against the utilization of health and social services. That is, there seems to be a very important paradox in the literature on the role of primary networks for lower class blacks. On the one hand they seem to be the very mechanisms that have contributed to black survival in a racist and economically exploitative environment, and on the other hand the literature suggests that such networks may actually impede the proper utilization of available helping services. Suchman (1965) found that lower class minority group members tend to have strong ingroup identity and parochialism which work against their turning towards "outside" sources for help during illness. The problem seems to have as much to do with the organizational capabilities of different network structures as it does with attitudes, per se. As Horowitz (1977:3) puts it, in distinguishing between the relative merits of "open" ended and "close-knit" networks in the utilization of psychiatric services, "when persons are tied to a number of other people, who are not tied to each other, they have more channels to reach information and influences and they more easily connect to social institutions".

This does not mean that the mere absence of close-knit primary networks will contribute to the increased utilization of professional services. In fact, those persons in an anomic environment (i.e., with little social support and few resources) would in all probability be faced with the greatest social isolation and the highest incidences of abuse. Such abuse would probably only be discovered as police and other public agencies are called in to deal with an emergency that has gone public and "broken the peace".

The presence of family-kin-locality networks provides support, information and referral services that are not available through other means. For example, while McKinlay (1973) found that women with close-knit networks of kin and friends did delay the utilization of professional services; when they did use such services it was often after having first consulted with friends and relatives. That is, social workers may find that such primary network structures can be an important source of help and information for potential clients provided that they and the services they offer are not perceived as outside intrusions that their membership should be buffered and protected against.

Leichter and Mitchell (1967) caution that social work generally tends to be geared to working with individuals outside of the family-kin context that is so important in their everyday lives. They warn that until social workers can work with and through relatives and friends many of their intervention strategies will be unsuccessful. This seems to be especially true for elder abuse which strives on social isolation, is seldom reported by the abused or immediate family members, and can only be effectively treated with the help of those intimately associated with the abused. Many social workers have not only recognized that

family-kin-locality network structures must be respected when attempting to administer services to families and individuals who need them, but also realize that these existing "natural helping networks" can often be incorporated into the intervention strategy. Collins and Pancoast (1976) see these natural helping networks as virtually untapped resources for preventive intervention. In fact, Gil (1970) found that blacks respondents reported that they were more willing to become personally involved than whites if they knew of a case of child abuse in their neighborhood.

In cases where such network structures do not already exist Collins and Pancoast (1976) suggest the formation of artificial networks. For example, a social worker concerned with the potential of elder abuse in what is perceived as a high risk neighborhood might attempt to identify a small number of indigenous neighborhood support persons (i.e., residents who are already normally called into action when neighborhood members have problems). These persons could regularly visit homes that are burdened with providing long-term custodial care for the aged. Their mere presence may reduce much of the stress and isolation normally associated with elder abuse. They can observe "high risk" situations and make recommendations as to when additional supportive services are needed (e.g., custodial assistance, counseling, training in specific custodial care techniques, financial assistance, or respite care that would provide long-term caretakers with a brief retreat from their stressful duties). They may be able to help more directly when actual cases of abuse are uncovered or are suspected. They can become a friend of the family and help them negotiate what might ordinary be a traumatic encounter with professional agency workers who intervene on the behalf

of the elderly. Such community based strategies may be particularly important in those communities where there is strong sentiment against the institutionalization of the aged as even a last resort to dealing with severe and persistent cases of elder abuse.

Beyond "Band-Aid" Approaches: Societal Level Factors

To move pass what Straus, et al., (1980) refer to "band-aid" or "ambulance at the bottom of the cliff" types of solutions to family violence among black Americans will require fundamental changes in the social predicaments that many black families and many of the black aged find themselves in. Such policies must include provisions for: a guaranteed annual income, low-cost national health insurance, adequate and affordable housing, federal assistance in the way of supportive services for those encharged with the long-term custodial care of the frail elderly, tax incentives for relatives who assume such responsibilities, community-based respite care facilities, the expansion of low-income home care facilities, federally funded community-based chronic care facilities, the establishment of family counseling centers to help family members cope with the stress of long-term custodial care, etc.

At present the focus has been limited to mandatory reporting laws and the establishment of a few experimental service programs. As the systems analysis has suggested a more "holistic" approach would probably be best received and have the greatest payoffs in low-income black communities. "Band-aid" solutions may not only be ineffective, they may serve to encourage suspicion and retrenchment among those who need it most. In fact, if they deal only with the symptoms and not the root causes of elder abuse among black Americans they may serve to increase the hostility that many low-income blacks have for externally imposed

service functionaries. This may cause more stress, more isolation, and ultimately tend to aggravate the problem rather than to alleviate and eliminate it.

Any effective attempt to eliminate elder abuse among black Americans must involve attacking racism and economic exploitation; respecting and building on the strengths of family-kin-community networks, helping the black aged maintain their health and independence for as long as possible, and the building of better, less stressful environments and circumstances.

CONCLUSION

In brief, we have seen that just as there is no one cause of elder abuse, there is no one solution. In the development of effective intervention strategies and preventive social policies we must be sensitive to the precise etiology and nature of abuse among different groups of people. Each group's strengths and vulnerabilities will determine how elder abuse is manifested and how it can best be treated and eliminated. The problems faced by the black aged are complex, varied, and do not occur in a social vacuum. The solutions to their problems, therefore, must be imaginative, diverse, and respectful of the full complexity of every level of the social system they live in.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Issues concerned with inequality and discrimination against minorities are socially recognized and noteworthy exceptions.

[2] Thorman (1980) suggests six "dos and don'ts" for social workers attempting to establish rapport with families where child abuse has occurred. They may apply equally as well to work with abusive family members of the elderly.

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